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ABSTRACT

Generative rhetoric is an essential part of any composition program or instruction in written language that begins with the preschool child and continues through the freshman year of college and beyond. Applying the principles of generative rhetoric to selected essays and student performance established the need to maintain the place of generative rhetoric in the freshman English program at the University of North Dakota. The program is a sequence of two courses, the first dealing with the structures of written discourse, concentrating on narration and description; the second on the strategies of written discourse as they apply to expository and persuasive prose. Problems in maintaining the program have arisen from the community's expectations of instruction in the basics, the use of unfamiliar jargon, and the faculty's lack of training in and disdain for teaching composition. To overcome these difficulties, two principles have been kept in mind: the focus of a freshman English course should never leave writing, and the process of teaching writing should be viewed holistically as beginning with the preschool child and never ending. If generative rhetoric along with sentence combining and other proven tactics were taught in the public schools, freshman English would not need to be a remedial program, but a college level course in the higher strategies of rhetoric and writing. (AEA)

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THE GENERATIVE RHETORIC OF PRACTICALLY EVERYTHING

I should tell you at the outset that the title listed in the program for these remarks has nothing to do with anything. When Bonniejean Christensen asked me to take part in this meeting she gave me some time to invent a topic--or at least a title. A month later she asked for my title. I had none. Another month passed and still nothing. Finally, she insisted, and I blurted out, "The Generative Rhetoric of Practically Everything." You see, I had been recalling Frank D'Angelo's essay "The Generative Rhetoric of the Essay," published in CCC of December 1974, and wondering how I could go beyond it to the generative rhetoric of something bigger and grander than the essay. I have frequently got myself into trouble that way.

But if my grandiose title does nothing else, it does at least imply my abiding respect for an idea which, to me, is more than a bit of pedagogy. An idea that is a way of thinking about language, a way of thinking about the observable world, a way of thinking. But, then, those of you who have taught the sentence as a structure for generating ideas and observations and words and phrases--in the language of the rhetorician, for inventing--know what I mean. You know what I am talking about if you have used the principles that govern the sentence to generate readable, clear paragraphs. Do not mistake me. I won't stand here and maintain that generative rhetoric will turn a nation of nonwriters into writers in a few years. We've all been around long enough not to trust such easy solutions. And no one so far as I can tell has ever made such a claim for generative rhetoric. I do believe

it is an absolutely essential part of any composition program--when I say "composition program" in this instance I am talking about instruction in language, especially the written language, that begins with the pre-school child and continues through the freshman year of college and beyond (more about this notion of "program" later).

No, I do not believe that generative rhetoric is a complete solution to our problems. For one thing there is much more work to be done. Earlier I mentioned Frank D'Angelo's article "The Generative Rhetoric of the Essay." It is an excellent essay and a fine extension of the principles first expounded by Francis Christensen some 17 or 18 years ago. But it doesn't work. D'Angelo applies the principles of coordination and subordination to the sentences of an associated press article comparing the political philosophies of Goldwater and McGovern. The sentences fall into beautiful patterns of arrangement based on coordinate and subordinate relationships. I was impressed. I sat down to analyze a couple of essays myself. As I recall, I looked first at Joan Didion's "John Wayne, a Love Song" from Slouching Toward Bethlehem. Armed with D'Angelo's rules for spotting subordination and coordination I tackled Didion. But Didion eluded D'Angelo and me. Her sentences did not fall into neat, orderly patterns of subordination and coordination. Some were subordinate to others in other paragraphs far removed; some were subordinate to continguous sentences and, at the same time, coordinate with earlier sentences in the essay. Didion's patterns of arrangement eluded me--well, not completely: there were strings of sentences that fell into the simple orderly patterns of the AP article. But overall Didion was unruly; her patterns were too large for my apparatus, too organic to be contained. And yet she moved sentence by sentence, from point to point, with a clarity and beauty that one could hardly deny.

But even though the generative rhetoric of the essay was not adequate to expose the intricacies of Didion's arrangement, it did allow me to notice features of Didion's arrangement that I would have missed without it. In the last sentence of his article, D'Angelo calls his effort "a necessary first step." It was indeed that and more, I think. Since that time there have been a few halting second steps, but there is much to be done before generative rhetoric can embrace "practically everything."

A while ago I referred to generative rhetoric as "a way of thinking," a habit of mind. Recently I had an opportunity to observe what happens to a young journalist who has not caught the habit. He was conducting an interview on our campus radio station, an affiliate of National Public Radio. His subject was a visiting speaker--a prosecutor at the Nuremburg trials, on campus to speak on the topic, the legal and moral ramifications of the trials. After all the proper introductions, the young interviewer asked his first question--something, I think, about the causes of the rise of the Third Reich, an appropriately general question but the wrong question: the interviewee responded that the question was outside his field, one for a political scientist, not a lawyer. The next question was equally general but more to the liking of the interviewee, whose answer was also fairly general. At that point one would have expected the interviewer to pursue some detail in the response--that is, to question his subject on a <u>lower level of generality</u>. Instead he asked another question on level one, on another topic, as general as the previous one. And so the interview proceeded, one general question after another, no attempt to press for clarifying examples or details, qualities or attributes. No doubt the interviewer had his questions prepared, standard procedure I am told. But those general questions generated nothing but generalities from the subject.

As I listened I found myself hoping the interviewer had not taken our English 101 course--that he had received credit by CLEP or one of those other devious methods that students have for avoiding experiences they consider unpleasant.

That brings me by a rather circuitous route to the real topic of these remarks: the place of generative rhetoric in our own freshman English program. This part might be called, "The Sorrows of a Middle-Aged Director of Freshman English."

The Freshman English Program at the University of North Dakota is a sequence of two courses--English 101 and English 102. About 1500 students complete the program during the academic year, distributed among 75 sections per semester, 22 students per class. In point of fact class size is about 18-20--after the faint hearts have dropped the course to return another day. In any given semester over the past three years, 55 percent of those sections have been staffed by graduate teaching assistants, 23 percent by faculty (i.e., full time, professorial, tenured or tenure-track faculty), and 22 percent by part time instructors or lecturers (our administration has had a difficult time naming these teachers--tenure credit and all that, you know). The part time people by whatever name are, with one exception, holders of masters degrees in English. Some are recent graduates of our university; some are faculty wives; some are migrants on their way to other places, other jobs. The exception is a well published free lance writer with a masters degree in theater arts.

The backbone of the freshman English staff is the graduate teaching assistant . The program is successful or not according to how well they do their work. We require graduate teaching assistants to complete, during their first semester of teaching, a seminar in the teaching of college

composition--a course that concentrates on equal parts of rhetorical theory, the composition process, and the workaday problems of facilitating the writing of 40 or so odd recalcitrant freshmen. Professors and part time instructors receive no formal instruction. We do hold a two-day workshop for all teachers of freshman English shortly before the fall semester begins. Beyond that it is simply a matter of closing one's eyes and hoping that they have the background and the good sense to understand the text and to apply it.

Our program is divided into two courses and according to two principles: English 101 is a course in the structures of written discourse--the sentences, paragraphs, and strings of sentences and paragraphs of contemporary written American English. English 101 concentrates, in the main, on two modes of discourse--narration and description. Our approach is the generative rhetoric of the sentence and the paragraph; the text is A New Rhetoric.

English 102 is a course in the strategies of written discourse, particularly in the composition of expository and persuasive prose. The course concentrates on three of the offices of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, and style, particularly as they apply to expository and persuasive prose. The approach is ecclectic; the text is Frank D'Angelo's Process and Thought in Composition.

If this program sounds fairly standard to you, you are absolutely correct. I'm always mildly amused when a book salesman or an administrator asks me why we don't have a remedial course or program. (I beg your pardon, I guess the current jargon is "developmental.") I'm amused because I consider this program remedial (but more about that later). Like most English departments, we have had to make some hard decisions about how to spend the available resources. It happens that the available resources are enough to staff a respectable freshman English program of

two courses, but not sufficient to hire tutors or staff remedial classes. Our students tend to cluster around average; we have very few who are illiterate and few first rate writers. Most of our students have a sort of basic sentence sense but could hardly be called syntactically fluent. Their model chambers, as Mark Twain called them, contain very few patterns; their idea of complexity is a left-branching sentence beginning with a subordinate clause opened with "as." Their idea of rhetoric--well, they have none; rhetoric is a pejorative term they have heard on the six o'clock news. Their most disabling problem is their low opinion of themselves: they don't believe they have anything to write about, any experience or opinion worth sharing with anyone else, or enough ability to catch the interest of a reader. And of course they suffer from the blank-paper syndrome.

To treat this problem both our courses have a heavy emphasis on the office of invention. The first course presents the sentence--the language--as the most important mode of invention. When one must use a variety of prose structures, then one must observe and invent to find matter for them. That is the most important function of generative rhetoric. The second course explores the more traditional modes of invention, from the common topics of classical rhetoric to the questions and probes of contemporary rhetoricians, even to the pentad of Kenneth Burke.

That is the basic content of our freshman composition program--nothing revolutionary, but hardly traditional. I do everything I can to discourage the kind of error correcting that threatens to make nonwriters of our students. We respect our students' dialects, but we assume that because they have enrolled at the University they have contracted to learn a dialect for communicating with large numbers of people. But the acquisition or polishing of a new dialect should not be predicated on the destruction of

any other. The learning of the writing process should be constructive, not destructive.

And that brings me to some of the problems that have attended the maintenance of this program. I suspect they are not different from the problems of any director of freshman English. To begin on the outside and work in: the community and the university community have expectations of freshman English that are not in every instance a perfect match with our aims. They believe in the basics--passionately--though they are not very sure about what the basics are. Consequently, we must take every opportunity to explain what is really basic: we must put the cosmetics of written English in their place; we must maintain a communication with the community so that they know we are interested in what they think and what they want for their young people. Generative rhetoric is easy to defend. What could be more basic than sentences--in their nearly infinite variety?

From our students--only some of them--as well as from the two communities we hear the complaint from time to time that we are teaching people to write fancy prose--not the sort of prose that is useful to the engineer, the budding business executive, the scientist. We are teaching literary discourse. As before, the solution to this problem lies in our ability to communicate with the people we serve. We must tell them what we are really doing. After all, this business about free modifiers and levels of generality, cumulative sentences and direction of modification can be confusing to people who are accustomed to "loose" and "periodic," "gerunds" and "participles"--if they are accustomed to any nomenclature at all.

Another threat to a successful freshman English program has its roots in the present academic climate, which is quite like the climate in the entire nation--its social and political bent. I'm sure I needn't tell

anyone here that students and universities have become excessively job minded, and of the diverting of funds to colleges and departments that promise the most and best jobs for graduates. To many embattled English departments freshman English has been a salvation--it has kept the wolf from the door. For freshman English represents the student credit hours that the funding formulas demand. But for this salvation to work in our favor faculty have had to accept a greater role in the teaching of freshman English--in most cases reluctantly.

Now Professors of English, by which I mean Ph.D.'s in literature, are no better suited to teach composition than anyone else on a college or university campus. When one of them does it well, you are as surprised as you would be to see a dog stand on his hind legs and sing an aria from a Wagnerian opera. But it's not entirely their fault, perhaps not at all. They were trained in graduate schools that elevated the study of literature above everything else in the curriculum, that made mere teachers of composition into second or third class citizens, that looked upon the teaching of composition as punishment. And, by the by, they also considered courses to help people teach as "educationist" and therefore incompetent and irrelevant. Anyone who had an adequate grasp of his subject matter could teach. And anyone at all could teach writing--if indeed it could be taught at all.

Out of that tradition have come large numbers of people who are now, out of a political necessity, floundering in freshman writing courses. They are having difficulty for a number of reasons not the least of which is the fact that they are nonwriters themselves. Some, like their counterparts in the public schools, do not write at all, at least not enough to know the problems of invention, arrangement and style that their students must face with every assignment. Others have devoted their

formative years learning to write a restricted dialect of English--the prose of literary criticism. A bit of foraging in one or two of our professional journals devoted to the study of literature is enough to tell anyone that the prose of those journals is different in significant respects from the more general forms of written discourse. The ability to write literary criticism is not, I think, a survival skill, except for you and me. People who have spent all their lives reading and writing articles from and for PMLA are likely to look askance at the generative rhetoric of the sentence. They are likely to harbor the time-honored prejudice in favor of the periodic sentence, in spite of the prose they read during their off hours in Playboy or Esquire or Ms. or Saturday Review or a dozen other "respectable" popular magazines.

Professors of English--most of them--are not comfortable teaching freshman composition without some other subject matter to go with it. And since the subject matter they know best is literature, we still see a great many freshman English programs combining literature and composition. It should not be necessary to point out that composition is not a course without a subject matter and that the addition of an extraneous subject matter can be so distracting that the course can be completely diverted from its original purpose.

Finally, Professors of English, liberals all, in spite of their resistance to changing the traditional composition course, fancy themselves the guardians of goodness, truth, and beauty in the language. Many of them are indeed liberal enough to realize that the language is changing (one or two have even begun to accept "hopefully" as a sentence adverb), but there are limits to their liberality. They are implaccable foes of the cliche, hunting it down and rubbing it out wherever they find it, in a student's

paper or a colleague's conversation. They are devotees of George Orwell, Edwin Newman and Thomas Middleton. Well, that is all right; we all admire one or more of that trio. The problem is that if we hurl the charge of "cliche" at our students repeatedly and if we grind Orwell into them, we are likely quash their first faltering efforts to put something on paper--we run the risk of turning the blank paper syndrome into a permanent disability. Dare I suggest that a close perusal of our own "mature" writing might produce words and phrases that would make Orwell rattle his chains?

I see that I have strayed somewhat from generative rhetoric. I shall return presently. First I have a principle or two, not to solve the preceding problems but to keep them at bay.

The proper study of composition is language. Any other subject matter is a distraction. I don't know an English teacher who can consider a literary text with a group of students without becoming a critic. If one uses, say, a novel in a freshman English course, one should have some carefully composed guidelines telling how it is to be used. The focus should never leave writing.

At the undergraduate level English departments have two purposes: to teach students to read (many dialects, many conventions) and to teach them to write. If professors of English come to view their jobs in that light perhaps they will become deflated enough to submit to a bit of retraining. I would guess that the present generation of new Ph.D.'s, many of them with training in rhetoric, composition, and pedagogy, may help to affect that change. But alas there are so few of them--with jobs.

Finally, I am convinced that until we view the process of teaching writing holistically, i.e., as a process that begins with the pre-school child and ends . . . never--composition from cradle to grave--we will never improve the quality of college writing. It is fine for us to attend CCCC

(I've been doing it for 10 years now) and boast of our triumphs, our beautiful schemes, and bemoan our failures. But one day soon we are going to have to start talking with our friends in the elementary schools, our former students in the secondary schools, and, yes, even some school administrators--talking with them about how together we might make some sense of the whole process. Then, I think, generative rhetoric along with sentence combining and a handful of other proven tactics, would wind up in the public schools. And then, I think, freshman English would no longer be a remedial program, but a college level course in the higher strategies of rhetoric and writing. I hope that will happen--but I doubt it.

In the meantime we have freshmen to teach. And we have the generative rhetoric of the sentence, the paragraph, and the essay; for a freshman who has written practically nothing, that is practically everything.

Norton D. Kinghorn